

The Shinobi Test: First Mission

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A ninja's career is brutal and based on violence. What if the tests used by Konoha to weed out candidates reflected this simple truth? - Team Seven's first mission in a harder and less forgiving world.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2012-08-03

Updated: 2012-08-15

Words: 12193

Chapters: 5

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Drama/Tragedy - Reviews: 201 - Favs: 309 - Follows: 320

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8389765/1/The-Shinobi-Test-First-Mission>

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Welcome to Team Seven

Author's Notes: I recently wrote a five chapter story called **The Shinobi Test**. As I often do I write it because I had an idea that interested me. Since writing fanfiction is my **hobby** I tend to write whatever interests me at a given time. Now as anyone who follows me probably knows that also means I have longer stories that remain incomplete that I may or may not eventually finish. The best known of my unfinished work being **That Look**.

I know how much readers hate stories being left incomplete. I am a reader of fanfiction too after all. However, as I said before this being my **hobby** I choose to update what interests me not what most people would choose for me to work on. Also I am spending a lot of my free time working on original material. Any of you who would like to read my original work can visit my website through a link on my fanfiction homepage.

Since I didn't want to begin another long story that would never be completed I deliberately made **The Shinobi Test** a short one. I want to continue writing in the somewhat harsher and more realistic setting and I noted it got a very strong response for a five chapter story. I want to continue but I don't want to end up with one more incomplete story that will aggravate people.

Here is the solution I have come up with. I am going to write 'Arcs' set in this world. These will be short, self-contained stories set in the same world. Expect them to be between three and six chapters with a maximum of ten.

"What do you mean I can't enter?" Kurenai demanded. She was dressed in black for mourning as were her students Kiba and Shino who were with her. "Hinata is being buried today isn't she? We've only come to show our respect."

The Hyuuga who was at the compound gate bowed respectfully but his words were firm. "I apologize Kurenai-san, but my instructions were quite clear. The ceremony is to be limited to family members only, no outsiders will be permitted."

"Damn Hiashi," she cursed.

"Hey! If you don't let us in we'll force our way in!" Kiba shouted. Akamaru barked his agreement.

The nameless Hyuuga raised an eyebrow. "Do you truly wish to trespass onto clan lands and cause such an unsightly disturbance?"

"Venturing onto a clan's property without permission is a serious offense." Shino stated. "I also highly doubt that Hinata would want us to do so."

"Yeah well she's dead now!" Kiba said angrily. "All because of her wonderful clan and that prick that was supposed to be her father!"

"Kiba!" Kurenai said sharply. "You can't speak about the head of the Hyuuga clan like that!"

"What are you talking about sensei? You've been calling him a lot worse!"

"That is true." Shino noted.

Kurenai blushed with embarrassment. She had been much too loose with her tongue this morning, especially in front of her students. Even when not on a mission a ninja was supposed to keep certain things hidden.

"Never mind what I said. I shouldn't have said it." She again turned to the guard. "Please, we only want to pay our final respects."

"I am sorry, but my orders are clear." The guard stepped back inside and shut the gate.

Kurenai wanted to just jump over it and go in anyway, but she knew that was impossible. *Hiashi and the others really are monsters* .

"Hey I say we just go over the fence and go in anyway." Kiba said.

"I am certain we would be quickly apprehended and handed over to the proper authorities for punishment." Shino answered.

"Don't you even care that Hinata killed herself?" Kiba snapped.

"I do," Shino said in his stoic voice. "That does not make your suggestion any less irrational."

"It's fine." Kurenai lied and placed a white flower beside the gate. "I'm sure Hinata knows our feelings. That is enough." She put her palms together in silent prayer.

Kiba and Shino followed her example and put their flowers down and offered up prayers for their former teammate. For a moment the only sound was the whimpering of Akamaru.

At last Kurenai nodded. It wasn't much, but this was all that she could do for that poor little girl. "Let's go." She and her two students quietly walked away.

Naruto was headed to the little bridge where his team always met. He was in a pretty good mood. He hadn't heard how the other Genin squads had done, and even though Sakura was no longer a teammate they had gone on an actual date. Well Sakura had said it was just two friends eating together, but that still counted right? Ayame had even said they looked cute together!

He hadn't gotten to see Sakura much since Ichiraku's. Now that she was reclassified as a civilian her parents had to register her to go back to school! Naruto thought that might just be the cruelest part in all of this. She went from being a ninja and an adult to being just a twelve year old girl attending middle school. Harsh.

Still... during the few minutes they'd gotten to talk yesterday she hadn't seemed upset about it. She'd actually sounded really excited by the prospect of going back to being a student. It was just a shame that she was too busy with things to spend much time with him. *It's okay though, like Sakura-chan said we'll see each other all the time .*

When Naruto approached the bridge it was about ten minutes to ten. He was anything but surprised to not see Kakashi-sensei there. He was surprised however to see a girl with teal colored hair and black pants with a forest green jacket and shirt. He knew immediately she was a ninja. Not only from the hitai-ite around her forehead but from her weapons pouches and two sheathed swords that were slung over her back.

As soon as she spotted him the girl turned her full attention his way. Naruto was relieved that there didn't seem to be any of the hatred or open mistrust in her eyes that he saw in so many villagers. She looked to be slightly older than he was and Naruto was annoyed to see she was at least three or four inches taller and towered over him.

"You must be my new teammate Naruto. I am most pleased to meet you." Naruto was then treated to a very rare occurrence as the girl bowed to him. "I am Rika, Natsumi Rika, and I have just been transferred into your squad." Straightening up she offered him her hand.

Naruto smiled and immediately shook hands with her. He was so used to being ignored or outright disrespected that even this much civility was enough to make him happy. After shaking her hand he gave her a proud smile. "I see you've heard what an awesome and amazing ninja I am."

"Not exactly." She returned his smile. "I've just seen you being chased by the ANBU a few times. Besides, there aren't a whole lot of people who go around dressed in orange; you are sort of hard to miss."

"Oh," Naruto said clearly disappointed. "Well I'm sure you'll realize how amazing I am before long."

"No doubt."

A few minutes later Sasuke arrived.

Rika introduced herself to him with a bow and then offered him her hand.

Sasuke looked at it suspiciously. "You're not going to ask me to go on dates are you?"

She blinked in surprise. "I wasn't planning on it no."

"I suppose it's all right then." He took her hand and gave it a disinterested shake. Then as he always did he leaned against the bridge railing opposite of Naruto. The two of them deliberately trying not to look at each other.

Rika noticed the lack of interaction and the uncomfortable silence. She glanced at her watch and looked about. "The meeting time was set for ten right? Is Kakashi-sensei running late?"

That brought a laugh from Naruto and even Sasuke snorted and looked mildly amused.

"Kakashi is *never* on time." Sasuke told her.

"Except for when we left the village he is always two hours late for everything." Naruto said. "He'll show up some time around noon."

One of Rika's teal colored eyebrows rose. "Then why didn't he just schedule the meeting for noon?"

Naruto and Sasuke just shrugged.

"If he's always two hours late then why did both of you show up now?"

"He has some way of spying on us." Naruto told her. "If we show up late he knows and will make us run laps around the village."

(From a nearby rooftop a pug dressed in ninja gear was watching.)

"I see," Rika said neutrally.

When she'd been told she was being transferred into Hatake Kakashi's squad Rika had been thrilled. Kakashi's name was well known throughout the village and it seemed that all her hard work was being rewarded. Getting to work beside the last Uchiha also seemed like a great opportunity. Based on this first impression she was wondering how lucky she really was.

"So what's your story?" Sasuke asked.

"Excuse me?"

"How old are you? What sorts of jutsus do you know? What sort of experience do you have? Why were you chosen for this team?"

Rika frowned slightly. "I don't mind telling you about myself since we're going to be teammates, but you could be a little more polite about it. The way you asked sounds like an interrogation."

Sasuke merely shrugged.

"Don't mind him Rika-chan, he's a rude bastard to everyone." Sasuke sent a sharp look which Naruto ignored. "We both want to know about you."

"All right, well to begin with I am fourteen and a close combat weapons specialist." From her back she pulled out a long and short blade sword. "I fight with a katana and a wakizashi. The jutsus I know besides the standard ones are meant to give me increased speed, agility, and endurance. I was placed in a reserve squad under my Jonin sensei Chiharu Renji who..."

"What's a reserve squad?" Naruto asked.

Rika blushed looking embarrassed. "Ah, well you know how two thirds of the teams taking the Genin Test fail it?"

"Sure."

"Well, all those who fail on the first attempt are required to take six months remedial training before they are allowed to take it a second time. The training is designed to drill the idea of teamwork into you so about ninety five percent of the applicants pass the second test. Those who do are formed into reserve squads, those who fail are removed from shinobi status."

"So they only give you two chances to pass the Genin Test? That's really harsh!" Naruto said.

"Ninja life isn't meant to be gentle idiot," Sasuke said coldly. "Have you still not figured that out yet?"

Naruto glared at him openly while Sasuke stared back with disinterest.

Rika wondered where all this hostility was coming from. Teammates didn't always get along perfectly, but they didn't normally snap at each other like this either.

"Anyway," Rika continued. "Squads that are formed that way are designated reserve squads. That's because they aren't meant to be long term. Their members are always subject for transfer to fill in holes in other squads that have, uh, suffered a loss. I'm guessing that's why I'm here."

"The girl you're replacing failed the final test." Sasuke said. "Since you must have passed it I guess that means you must at least be competent."

"Her name is Sakura and you've known her as long as I have at least use her name!"

"Fine, you're here to replace an incompetent girl named Sakura." Sasuke glanced at Naruto. "That better?"

Naruto growled and clenched his fists.

"Wait a minute. The person I'm replacing wasn't lost on a mission, but just failed the Shinobi Test, right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Naruto said. "She is still awesome though."

"No doubt," Rika said. "But that means that you still haven't been on a mission yet right? The two of you are fresh out of the Academy?"

"That's so," Sasuke admitted. "I was the top rookie though, and being an Uchiha it won't be long until I'm an elite Jonin."

"I'm going to be Hokage so I'm going to completely outshine him." Naruto was quick to add.

Rika sighed. *And it started off as such a good day.* "I was just getting used to doing C ranks."

"What's a C rank?" Naruto asked.

Rika stared at him. "You're kidding me right?"

When he stared back dumbly she explained to him about missions and rankings and about some of the other basics to ninja life. She was going over mission checks and how they were normally paid when noon arrived and with it Kakashi.

"Well I see you've met our new team member and everyone seems to be getting along."

Rika quickly introduced herself formally to her new sensei. "I hope to be a strong part of team Seven and to learn a lot from you sensei."

From behind her Sasuke snorted and Naruto burst into laughter.

Her new sensei smiled beneath his mask and rubbed the back of his head. "Well 'a lot' is a relative term."

Rika was getting a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Hey sensei," Naruto stepped forward. "Since we're finally real ninja we're going to start going on real missions right? Rika-chan explained about D ranks, you're not going to make us chase a cat or walk some dogs for our first mission are you?"

Kakashi gave him a wide smile beneath his mask. "Of course not Naruto, I give you my word. Now then Team Seven let's get going to our first mission."

The three Genin found themselves painting a fence.

"This sucks!" Naruto shouted. He glared furiously at his sensei who was sitting in the shade nearby reading his little orange book. His students were out under the hot sun splotches with white paint. "I thought you said we weren't going to do a D rank."

"No," Kakashi replied calmly. "I just promised it wouldn't involve catching a cat or dog walking. I'm saving those for later."

"Then at least let me use my kage bunshins, we can get this done in five minutes."

"There are only three paint brushes idiot." Sasuke pointed out.

Naruto growled something under his breath.

Rika sighed and silently wondered what she'd done to deserve this.

Rika is not Sakura

After completing their first mission together the owner of the property had come out to inspect the newly painted fence. When he nodded that he was satisfied he took out his purse and paid Kakashi the mission fee; ten thousand ryu.

"All right team you did very well," Kakashi told them. All three team members had splotches of white paint on their hands, arms, and clothes and looked a little weary. They had been working for four hours under a hot sun. "Oh and Naruto, just so you know, anything you are in possession of when using a kage bunshin will also be copied. That means if you'd had a paint brush with you all your clones would have had one too."

Naruto's jaw dropped, and then he looked absolutely furious. "Why didn't you just tell me that before?! We could have been done in about five minutes!"

"For this particular mission I wouldn't have allowed it. The main goal wasn't actually painting the fence but rather building team chemistry and unity. The best way to achieve that is through shared suffering."

Naruto, Sasuke, and Rika all sent him very flat looks as they imagined using him for target practice.

"And it worked," Kakashi said cheerfully. "You're all united in your hatred of me."

Sasuke grunted. "You have a point."

Kakashi began to divide up the money in his hands. "Now since the mission was successfully completed the client has paid us the fee agreed upon in our contract. For a mission involving a three man squad each team member receives ten percent. The commander receives twenty, and as with all missions the village receives fifty."

"Here you are." He handed each of them a single thousand ryu note. "You are free for the rest of the day. We'll meet again tomorrow at ten."

"Wait a minute! This is it? This will buy my like three bowls of ramen!" Naruto objected.

"Welcome to D ranks." Rika sighed and just put her payment away. *I guess I'll be eating instant ramen and noodles for a while.*

"This can't be right! Everybody says that ninja make lots of money! Isn't that the whole reason there are ninja villages in the first place?" Naruto argued. While money wasn't his main motivator he *had* assumed once he was a real ninja he'd finally be able to move out of his crappy apartment and own some nice things. That only seemed fair given he was willing to risk his life for the village.

"We just painted a fence." Sasuke said dryly. "How much were you expecting to get paid idiot?"

Naruto glared at his teammate. "That's easy for you to say! You're rich mister, 'I have my very own compound in the middle of the village.' I hear you're the only one who even lives in it. What are you too good to share?"

Sasuke looked absolutely murderous for a moment. The reason the Uchiha compound remained empty was because he couldn't bear to have strangers living there. For him it was a memorial to all his relatives who had been slaughtered. Mocking that sounded like Naruto was mocking all those deaths. The only thing that kept Sasuke from knocking the idiot on his ass was knowing he was probably too dumb to understand what he'd just said.

Sasuke instead turned around and walked away.

Seeing the bastard stomp off Naruto was about to say something more but he caught a warning look from his sensei. He also noted

that Rika looked a bit uncomfortable. He grumbled quietly not understanding why they were both on Sasuke's side.

"Naruto," Kakashi said quietly. "I would avoid making comments like that to Sasuke. Especially if you're ever someplace with no witnesses."

"Huh?"

"As to your original question about your pay." Kakashi pressed on. "That's standard for most D rank missions. It is true that ninja can make a lot of money, for themselves and the village, but how much a mission is worth is directly proportional to how difficult and dangerous the mission is. You're not likely to be killed painting a fence inside Konoha."

Naruto looked unhappy but nodded. He had to admit that made sense. "So when will start doing real missions?"

"When I think you are ready." Kakashi said with a hidden smile.

"Uh sensei?" Rika spoke up.

"Yes Rika? Nice job today by the way. I can't tell you how good it is to have at least one student who doesn't spend all their time complaining and asking me to teach them something."

Rika opened her mouth and then closed it. "Never mind, I will see you tomorrow sensei, Naruto." She headed off.

Kakashi chuckled.

"Hey Kakashi-sensei," Naruto spoke a bit nervously. "Do you think Rika knows?"

"Knows about what?"

"Well..." He pointed to his stomach. "You know."

"I could ask her, but if she doesn't know I'd be executed for breaking the Hokage's law. She was only two at the time of the Kyuubi's attack. I'd say chances are high she doesn't know."

"Thank kami." Naruto said with a sigh of relief.

"You know the law doesn't apply to you Naruto. You can tell anyone you like. That includes your teammates."

"Are you crazy? Why would I do that? Almost everybody here hates me already."

"You might find your teammates more accepting than you expect."

"Or they might be just like everyone else." Naruto left to head home.

With a sad shake of his head Kakashi set out for the Tower.

On his way home he saw the looks.

It was just like every other day. The people in the street would have the same ugly expressions. They hated and feared him. They would stare for just a moment and then they would all look away and try to pretend he didn't exist. No one ever hit him. When he'd been a small child it had happened a few times until the ANBU made some examples and then it had stopped completely. No one touched him and it was rare to even have people yell at or curse him.

They just ignored him.

He had never felt as though he belonged. He had always been made to feel alone and an outsider. Before that night with Mizuki he'd never even known why, at least now he had a reason. Before becoming a ninja he'd been able to count the number of people who treated him decently on one hand; Teuchi, Ayame, Iruka, and the old man. Now since then Sakura had become his girlfriend, Kakashi

treated him decently, and he had hopes that maybe he and Rika could be friends.

For a long while he'd really wanted Sasuke's acknowledgement, but after the way he'd treated Sakura now Naruto just wanted to be stronger than him. He wanted to force Sasuke to admit he was not as wonderful as he thought.

As he went the people deliberately made a wide space around him even as they turned their eyes away. They did all they could to make him feel like he didn't really exist. And these were the *adults* ! What would happen if he told Sakura or his teammates what was inside him? He knew how unfair most people were.

"Stupid sensei." Naruto muttered and picked up his pace.

The following day they performed two D rank missions; walking a number of dogs and cutting a dozen lawns.

"Is this really all we're going to do?" Naruto complained after Kakashi dismissed them for the day.

"It wouldn't be so bad if we at least got some training to go along with the pointless labor." Sasuke grunted. "That is part of a sensei's job isn't it? To train his students and make them better ninja?"

"Yeah! You're supposed to make us stronger!" Naruto for once agreed with Sasuke.

Kakashi sighed. "Believe it or not being a ninja is about more than just knowing jutsus. I need to build the foundations before I can even begin worrying about teaching you jutsu. You need to strengthen your teamwork, increase your physical endurance and strength, build up your chakra reserves and improve your control before I can begin teaching you jutsu. Learning jutsus is the last step and you are nowhere close to ready."

"Then help us get ready." Sasuke growled. He was frustrated. He needed to get stronger to avenge his clan and his sensei's lackadaisical attitude wasn't helping him with that.

"Yeah! You need to help us more!" Naruto was frustrated. He needed to get stronger to become Hokage and make the villagers acknowledge him. Kakashi's lazy attitude wasn't getting it done.

"I am helping, these missions are teaching you how to work together and deal with unpleasant activities." He motioned for them to relax. "One step at a time, if you want to do more though you can always train together in your free time." Kakashi hinted.

Both Naruto and Sasuke opened their mouths to argue when Rika spoke.

"Could you reserve a training ground for us sensei?" Both boys looked at her startled.

Kakashi looked pleased. "Training Ground One is general purpose and it's open to all ninja. You can train there any time you like. The only condition is you're not permitted to use destructive jutsus or explosive notes. No burning down or blowing up the terrain."

"What? You mean we could have been training there all this time?" Naruto asked not believing it. "Why didn't you tell us that?"

"You never asked."

All three students sweat dropped.

"Sensei please don't take this the wrong way," Rika asked politely. "But by any chance is there a different Hatake Kakashi in the village?"

At Training Ground One they spotted several other squads doing basic exercises. The area was two square miles though so they had

no trouble finding a space for themselves. Rika shrugged off her jacket and her two swords and loosened up a little. "In my old squad we would begin every morning with stretches then a hundred sit ups, a hundred pushups, and a three mile run. *Then we would train.*"

"Sounds like you had a really good teacher." Naruto said.

"Well Renji-sensei believed in hard work. 'Sweat saves blood,' he liked to say."

"I bet he taught you lots of jutsus."

Rika smiled. "I was with him for a year and a half and he taught me three of them."

"Only three?" Naruto sounded disappointed.

"Jutsus are hard to master. Trying to learn too many may prevent you from maximizing any of them. It may also cause you to hesitate in battle trying to choose, that can be fatal. Most Genin and Chunin rely on only a handful of jutsu. It's mostly just the Jonin who have lots of them."

Naruto looked upset but quickly brightened. "That's okay, I'll be a Jonin real soon and then I'll learn all the jutsus there are."

"No doubt," Rika said politely. "Why don't we start off by sparring so I can get some idea of where your taijutsu is?"

"Sure!" Naruto said.

"Hn." Sasuke was not enthused, but this might be better than training alone.

Rika dropped into a fighting stance. "Well then how about we start Naruto? Come and attack me as hard as you can."

Grinning Naruto threw himself at her needing no encouragement. He launched a wild series of punches and kicks that he was sure would

just overwhelm her. Rika was forced to back up a couple steps as she blocked his strikes. Naruto was excited as he had the taller girl on the run.

Then all of a sudden he felt her grab his arm and he was flying through the air. "Wha?"

He thudded on his back and had all the air forced out of him. Before he could scramble back up a sandaled foot stepped on his chest and pinned him to the ground.

"That was just plain horrible." Rika said in a lecturing tone that reminded him of Sakura. "Your forms are sloppy, your footwork is nonexistent, you have no sense of balance, and you're all attack; you don't even think about defense." She removed her foot and offered him a hand up.

Blushing Naruto accepted and quickly got back to his feet. "It's not my fault; the instructors wouldn't ever help me except for Iruka."

Rika didn't know what to make of that. She had been in the Academy class just two years ahead of him. Naturally some of her classmates had been worse than others but the instructors had made sure everyone had the basics down. She didn't understand how one student could be allowed to slide by with such subpar skills.

"Well that's okay; I can help you improve your taijutsu."

"Why would you?" Naruto asked suspiciously. Except for Iruka no one ever wanted to help him train. The few times some of his classmates offered to it had just been as a joke.

"Because I am your teammate and I want you to at least be competent in hand to hand. Someday my life may depend on you and your fighting skills. It's in my own best interest to help you." Why did she have to explain that? Wasn't it obvious?

Naruto considered it and very slowly nodded. "Okay, then I'd be glad to have you help me."

"Good and I'm sure Sasuke will want to help you too."

"I will?"

Rika looked over at him. "Did you not hear what I just said about my life possibly depending on him? That applies to you too you know."

"I'm a lot stronger than he is."

Naruto growled.

"You did pass the Genin Test right?" Rika asked feeling a little exasperated. What was wrong with these two? "A squad needs to work together as a single unit. Otherwise each member ends up fighting alone and vulnerable. You want strong teammates who can help you and watch your back. And besides, the sooner the entire team is strong the sooner Kakashi will probably let us go on a C rank."

Sasuke opened his mouth with a snide comment, but then closed it. What she'd just said was probably true. Sakura's weakness would have held him back. Naruto's was bound to do the same. Even being an avenger it would be faster if he helped the idiot improve. "All right I suppose I'll help him."

Naruto's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

"Don't get the wrong idea, it's just helping myself."

Naruto nodded but couldn't help but think that maybe he wasn't a *complete* bastard.

"Well I'm glad that's settled." Rika dropped into a fighting stance and faced Sasuke. "How about you spar with me now?"

"Sure."

One minute later...

Rika found herself on her back with Sasuke's foot on her chest and a smug smile on his face. "I told you I wasn't like the idiot."

"No doubt," Rika admitted. He had come in with a straightforward series of jabs and taken her by surprise with a leg sweep. "You're excellent at taijutsu and I can see how you were rookie of the year in your class."

Sasuke nodded. "I am an Uchiha."

"You're also full of openings."

"What?"

With her right hand she grabbed hold of the foot he'd planted on her. With her left she took out his other leg and sent him falling. As soon as his back hit the ground she used her legs to pin down both shoulders. Sasuke suddenly found himself helpless on the ground with a girl sitting there holding both his legs up in the air. He was staring up at her grinning face.

"I didn't tap out or say the spar was over. You shouldn't just assume a fight is done until it really is."

"Those aren't legal moves for a taijutsu match."

"Want to complain to the instructor?"

"There is no instructor." Sasuke growled.

"My point exactly." Rika said.

"You cheated."

"Is that what you're going to say when an enemy ninja does something you don't expect? You plan to cry and say 'you cheated'?"

"Man I wish I had a camera right now." Naruto said.

Sasuke's face reddened, he was not used to being shown up.

"Say you give and I'll let you go."

"No."

Rika raised an eyebrow. "You do know a certain... weak point is exposed and open to being hit right now?" She directed her eyes to that certain spot.

"You wouldn't."

"No doubt, but do you really want to take that chance?"

"I give." Sasuke ground out.

In a nearby tree Pakkun chuckled. "Kakashi will get a laugh out of this."

The first C rank

Naruto was slumped over his bowl of ramen, his eyes half closed.

"Am I boring you Naruto?"

"What? No!" He instantly sat up straight as a board and his eyes were wide open with the usual wide smile plastered on his face. "I could never be bored on one of our dates Sakura-chan."

"This isn't a date Naruto." Sakura told him patiently. "It's hanging out together as friends."

"Well it's sort of a date right?"

"No." Sakura said flatly. "Naruto we're both twelve, that is much too young to date."

"Since when?" Naruto said startled. "How many times did you ask Sasuke to go out with you?"

Sakura sighed and Naruto thought it was the cutest thing he'd ever seen. Sakura's school uniform looked really adorable on her too.

"I'll admit that was a mistake. Looking back on it I understand now that it was just obsession, not real love."

Naruto nodded. "Yeah, I mean only an idiot could love such a heartless bastard."

Sakura's eyes flattened.

"Not that you're an idiot of course! I mean I was talking about Ino and the other girls. You throwing yourself at him every day was totally different! It was..."

"You should stop talking now."

"Right," he said in a small voice. Naruto was simply grateful that since her fixation with Sasuke had ended she'd become less violent.

Relaxing a little Sakura began eating some more of her ramen. "So what did you do today?"

"Eh, the usual." He smothered a yawn. "Met Sasuke and Rika at Training Ground One at seven. Did stretches, a hundred sit ups, a hundred pushups and went on a three mile run. Then we practiced taijutsu until we had to make our way over to the bridge for our ten o'clock meeting. We wasted a couple hours playing cards."

"Cards?"

Naruto nodded. "Rika is teaching us poker; she always keeps a couple packs of cards with her."

"I hope you're not playing for money."

Naruto shook his head. "She says she's going to wait until I have cash to lose first."

Sakura blinked. "How nice of her."

"I know isn't it?" Naruto replied completely missing her tone. "No one would ever play anything with me before. Sasuke even joins in since it makes the wait go by quicker."

"I see."

"We did two D ranks; we picked up trash in a vacant lot and we helped a family move." He rubbed his lower back. "Kakashi actually let me use kage bunshin for that one or it really would have taken all day. Normally after that we would go back to Training Ground One and work on tree walking, but it was almost six so instead I came here to meet you for our date."

"This isn't a date." Sakura reminded him yet again. In the month's time since she had left the team they had only seen each other four

or five times. She had been busy adjusting to her new school life while Naruto had been throwing himself into his training with all his usual energy. She'd agreed to have ramen with him so that they could catch up. "What's tree walking?"

Naruto's eyes lit up. "You know how you'll see ninja walk up the side of the Wall sometimes? It's like that! You have to put a precise amount of chakra into the soles of your feet and you can walk up the side of a tree. Rika-chan says it helps with chakra control. She says after I have it down she'll show me how to **walk on water**! Is that awesome or what?"

I've always had good chakra control. I bet I would have done pretty well. She couldn't help but feel just a little jealous. She hadn't been able to accept the uglier side of being ninja, but she still felt she could have been a really good one even so. In the Academy she had been better than Naruto at *everything* it still didn't seem entirely fair that he got to be a ninja and she didn't. No matter what sorts of things they did ninja remained the most honored occupation in Konoha. The weakest and lowest Genin still got more respect than any doctor or engineer did.

No matter what I do or how hard I work Naruto will always have something that I wanted and couldn't get.

"That's great Naruto. I'm glad you're learning such amazing things."

"Yeah," he said; happy to bask in Sakura's admiration.

Naruto, Sasuke, and Rika moved slowly and with all their stealth. Their target had led them a merry chase but the three of them now had it surrounded and all possible avenues of escape cut off.

Then the kitty's head popped up, ears twitching.

"It's going to make a run for it!" Sasuke called out.

Sure enough the cat began to flee as fast as it could.

"Naruto!" Rika shouted. "It's heading your way!"

"I got it!" He jumped out in front of the runaway pet arms outstretched.

The cat darted straight between his legs and as he tried to grab it missed and had to watch as it bolted away through his legs and deeper into the woods.

Sasuke ran past after their target and sent him an annoyed look.

Rika went by too. "Come on!" She looked more embarrassed for him than upset. He got himself turned around and started chasing the cat again.

This isn't fun at all! Why do those older boys always say they love chasing pussy so much?

Eventually Team Seven successfully completed the 'Catch the Annoying Flea Ridden Cat' mission. This time the client was at the Hokage Tower so Kakashi decided to bring his team with him as the cat was delivered to its owner Lady Shijimi. Naruto's hands and arms were covered in scratches. He took a sullen satisfaction at watching the miserable fur bag get hugged half to death.

"I give it two weeks before it makes another break for it." Naruto said under his breath.

Both teammates nodded.

The Hokage Sarutobi Hiruzen was going over a list in front of him. "I see your team has been quite active and efficient in taking care of D rank missions."

Kakashi rubbed the back of his head. "Oh it's nothing special, just the result of a lot of hard work."

All three students had identical looks of disbelief on their faces.

Sarutobi spared a warm smile for Naruto. "Tell me Naruto, how do you like finally being a ninja?"

Naruto answered immediately with a heartfelt, "It sucks!"

Everyone stared at him in disbelief.

"Naruto," Kakashi said in a cheering tone. "It's usually not a good idea to yell at someone who can have you put to death if he wants."

"Hey the old man asked am I supposed to lie?"

"You mean as opposed to screaming 'it sucks' at the top of your lungs?" Kakashi asked dead pan.

Sarutobi gave a patient sigh. "What is so terrible Naruto? I thought you would be happy having started your ninja career."

"I didn't spend all those hours working my tail off just so I could chase cats or pull weeds! I mean I barely even make enough to take my girl out on a date! I want to go on a real mission! One that actually involves using my ninja skills!"

"Don't be an idiot," his old teacher Iruka said testily. "You're rookies. It's only natural for you to start at the bottom and work your way up."

Naruto pointed at Rika. "She's not a rookie and Rika-chan has been teaching me and Sasuke all sorts of amazing stuff!"

"Is that so?" Sarutobi murmured. "What have you taught them?"

Seeing the Lord Hokage looking directly at her Rika felt the urge to run and hide. She swallowed and answered slowly. "I... I have helped them start an exercise routine, I have tried to help Naruto with his taijutsu, and I am showing them the tree walking exercise."

The Hokage nodded his head in approval. "It's good that you are helping your less experienced teammates."

Rika breathed a sigh of relief.

"Though," Sarutobi's attention drifted to Kakashi. "Shouldn't that be your responsibility?"

Kakashi shrugged. "What can I say? They're go getters."

"In other words," Sarutobi said. "You are being lazy and letting your most experienced student take up the slack."

"I prefer to think of it as me teaching them self-reliance."

"Nah," Naruto put in. "The old man's got it right. You're just lazy."

Kakashi smiled underneath his mask. "I see someone is volunteering to help me work on my Thousand Years of Death jutsu."

Naruto shuddered.

Sarutobi chuckled ever so slightly. He had of course been keeping an eye on Naruto using his crystal ball. While Kakashi could certainly be doing much more to advance his team's skills they were actually pretty far along considering two members had only been ninja for a month. He had been receiving subtle reminders from various quarters that the Chunin Exams were coming soon and that many were interested to see Sasuke in action. Kakashi had already approached him and stated he thought they could handle a low priority mission outside the village.

"Kakashi," Sarutobi spoke in his most stern voice. "What is your opinion? Is Team Seven competent enough to perform a C rank mission?"

His three students turned hopeful eyes in his direction.

Kakashi rubbed his chin and appeared to really think about it for a moment.

"No." He answered.

Kakashi could almost see the spirits of his students being crushed.

"But if I don't allow it I'll have to deal with their sad faces. So I'll pretend they're ready and just hope none of them get killed."

His students immediately perked up.

"Well then, I think I have an ideal mission." Sarutobi said. "It's a prisoner escort here inside of Fire country. All you have to do is deliver a prisoner from the remote village of Odawara where he is being held to the provincial capital of Nagoya. It should take one day to reach the village, one day for the actual mission, and one day to return."

"Wait a minute," Kakashi said instantly suspicious. "The transport is only going to take one day? How far is Odawara from Nagoya?"

"About forty miles."

That answer only increased Kakashi's suspicions. "Why would anyone pay the cost of a C rank just to move a prisoner such a short distance?"

"The prisoner is the leader of a local group of bandits." Sarutobi explained. "He has a bounty on his head and his trial is merely a formality. The villagers are afraid of being attacked along the way. They don't think the bandits will try anything once they realize there are ninja guards. These outlaws only number about twenty or so."

"I see." Kakashi answered. It would be a little hazardous but the Hokage was no doubt trusting that he could deal with that many men by himself. It would be good experience for his team and they wouldn't be in any real danger.

"Yeah! Now that's what I'm talking about!" Naruto began doing his happy dance.

Rita's mouth began to water as she imagined eating some beef and rice at her favorite restaurant.

Even Sasuke had a slight grin on his face.

"All right team," Kakashi said. "We meet at the gate tomorrow at eight. Team Seven is going on its first C rank."

Everyone headed home to prepare for what they all assumed would be an easy mission.

Naruto, that is not good news

Shortly before eight o'clock came Kakashi arrived at the gate where his team was already waiting for him.

Naruto grumbled then took out gama-chan, his frog purse; he pulled out a thousand ryu note and handed it to Rika. "How did you know?"

Rika made the money quickly disappear. "No Jonin would ever be late for an actual mission."

"Not even one as lazy and worthless as Kakashi-sensei?"

"No, not even him."

Kakashi sweat dropped. This wasn't exactly the sort of respect and admiration most senseis got from their students.

"All right team," Kakashi began not revealing his embarrassment. "Now for Rika this will be just another assignment, while for Sasuke and Naruto this will be the first real mission. While I don't expect any serious trouble *all* missions of C rank or higher hold at least the potential for danger. From this moment until we have returned I expect all of you to be alert for anything and ready to do whatever is required to complete the mission and protect both yourselves and your teammates. Understood?"

All three of his students nodded and looked bright eyed and bushy tailed.

"All right then." Reaching into his vest he pulled out a little orange book. "Let's move out."

"Is he really going to read that on the road where people can see?" Rika mumbled beneath her breath.

Her teammates both nodded.

"Why are you so surprised?" Naruto asked. "He does that all the time."

"I guess I'm not really surprised," Rika sighed dejectedly. "I was just hoping he wouldn't embarrass us outside the village too."

Sasuke gave a snort. "Keep hoping."

As soon as they were on the road Sasuke got up about ten yards in front of Kakashi as he had on the way to the Land of Lilies. Naruto immediately fell in on his right side, determined not to allow the Uchiha to be even one step ahead of him. A moment later Rika was walking alongside on his right so that Naruto was in the middle.

Both boys looked at her.

"What?"

"Sakura would never walk with us," Naruto explained. "She normally stayed back with sensei."

Rika shrugged. "I'm not Sakura."

"Thank kami." Sasuke said which earned him an angry look from Naruto.

Heading north at a steady pace they covered mile after mile. The day was warm, but not unpleasant.

"This is one of the best parts about being a ninja." Naruto said as he stretched his arms. "Getting to travel and see different places."

Rika nodded. "Yeah, it is fun to discover new people and locations."

"How many C ranks have you been on?" Naruto asked curiously.

"Twelve, and most of those were in Fire country. I did go to Bear country and the Land of Hot Springs." She smiled fondly. "Our team

got a free one day stay at a hot spring resort; it was part of our payment."

"Lucky," Naruto pouted slightly.

"Did any of your missions see any fighting?" Sasuke asked.

"Yes. We were protecting a silver shipment bound for Yokoto when a group of thieves tried to take it."

Sasuke frowned slightly. "Yokoto is part of Fire country."

Rika nodded. "No doubt."

"Wait! You were attacked inside Fire?" Naruto said surprised.

Rika looked at him. "What? Did you expect all of Fire to be just like Konoha? There's not much crime in the village because it's filled with ninja. There aren't many criminals who are brave enough, or stupid enough, to try anything with a police force made up of shinobi. Fire country is a big place though, with millions of people. There aren't ninja everywhere."

Naruto thought about it and nodded slowly.

"So what happened?" Sasuke asked again. "With the thieves and the silver?"

"About what you'd expect." Rika said simply.

Sasuke raised a single eyebrow. "I see."

"Wait, I don't get it." Naruto said. "What happened?"

"The thieves were all killed." Rika answered simply. "There were fifteen of them. I got two, my teammates got three and my sensei got the rest."

"You killed them all? Seriously?" Naruto sounded as though he couldn't believe it.

Rika looked him in the eye. "Yes we did."

There was something a little cold and a little hard in Rika's expression and it made Naruto turn away.

Kakashi spoke up without ever bothering to take his face away from his book. "Most ordinary criminals will avoid attacking ninja. Chances are the thieves didn't realize who was protecting the shipment."

Rika nodded. "That's what Renji-sensei thought, that or they really believed they could sneak by us in the middle of the night."

"Some criminals don't believe the stories they hear about ninja and underestimate us." Kakashi said. "It's not a mistake most make more than once."

"So you killed two of them?" Naruto asked. "So counting the last test you've killed three people?"

"That's right."

"What was it like killing in the second time?" Sasuke asked in a low voice.

"Way different than the test. Easier."

"Because they deserved it?" Sasuke asked in the same low voice.

Rika thought about it for a few seconds. "Maybe a little, you don't really think of it in terms of them deserving it. When it's real all you think about is the fight. They are armed and they are trying to kill you. All the training and all the instincts kick in, your heart starts racing and every inch of you comes alive. You know what to do and you just sort of do it, in a way it almost becomes like training except you don't hold back."

Sasuke smirked. "So I guess you're a killer."

"No," she answered him with a serious look. "I'm a ninja."

Sasuke responded with a single nod.

"You notice she said ninja," Kakashi added. "Not avenger. That *is* the proper job description."

Sasuke sent him an annoyed look which Kakashi, engrossed in his book, completely missed.

They reached Odawara in the early evening.

Travelling north they had passed a number of other villages and small communities. These simply consisted of homes and other building spread out around some central location. Unlike Konoha they didn't bother with walls or defenses.

By comparison Odawara was completely surrounded by a wooden stockade with several watch towers. If that were not enough a dry moat had been dug and its bottom had been covered with sharpened wooden spikes. In front of the sole gate was a wooden draw bridge that was currently up. Being ninja they could have easily leapt the moat and simply run up the fort. (Once everyone on the team had tree walking down.) For people without the ability to mold chakra the defenses would be a serious obstacle.

Kakashi noted at least a couple dozen men in the watch towers and walking along the battlements. For a village with a population of only about a thousand that was quite a lot of manpower. He also did not fail to note that all the men had on padded armor and were carrying bows or other weapons.

"Hn, they're pretty well fortified for some place in the middle of nowhere." Sasuke noted.

"I was thinking the exact same thing." Kakashi shut his book with a snap and put it away. "Well, let's go introduce ourselves."

The men at the gate had been expecting them and quickly lowered the drawbridge. As one guard took them inside the others hurriedly pulled it back up again. Going through the streets of Odawara people stopped to stare at them. Many came out of their homes to get a good look at the ninja from Konoha.

Naruto was grinning from ear to ear. "Check out how happy everyone is to see us!" He waved at a family standing outside their home. The father and mother returned the gesture with cautious motions of their hands. The two children standing in front of them just continued to stare.

"You sure it's happiness?" Sasuke asked. "Looks more like relief to me."

"What would you know?" Naruto demanded.

Kakashi said nothing as their guide led them to the local jail.

The jail turned out to be about what you would expect for a village this size. It was a solid brick building with an office and just four cells. In one of them was a short, well-dressed man just lying on his bunk calmly relaxing. When they arrived his eyes darted to them, he appeared to make his judgments and then put his head back on the pillow and return to calmly looking up at the ceiling.

The wall to the right of the cells was covered from floor to ceiling with bounty posters. Some of them had photographs of the wanted me while others had drawings with the name and amount of bounty listed below. Just about all of them included the statement; bounty payable dead or alive. The offered amounts were mostly in the ten thousand to fifty thousand ryu range.

Besides the prisoner there were six men in the jail. All of them were armed and had padded armor on. The one who approached Kakashi had a grizzled face with more grey in his hair than black.

He extended his hand. "Thank you for coming. I am Daisuke the sheriff here."

Kakashi took the offered hand and shook it. "Thank you for receiving us. I am Hatake Kakashi and these are my students Uzukmaki Naruto, Uchiha Sasuke, and Natsumi Rika. We are here to escort your prisoner to Nagoya to stand trial."

From inside his cell the prisoner gave an amused snort. "Escort me to my execution you mean."

"Shut up Gideon," the sheriff growled.

"Why should I?" The prisoner asked pleasantly. "We both know you won't kill me no matter what I say."

The sheriff turned to Kakashi. "He's right about that. The hundred thousand ryu to pay for this mission is coming from his bounty. He has to be handed over to the authorities in Nagoya for it to be paid out."

"He has a bounty of a hundred thousand ryu?" Rika asked.

"No, his bounty is two hundred and fifty thousand, all of it payable to the village of Odawara since we were the ones who actually captured him. But a hundred thousand of that is being used to pay you to get him to Nagoya."

"That's quite a lot for someone who is just a local bandit." Kakashi noted.

"He and his men have been a plague on this entire province for years." Daisuke said sourly. "They move around from one end of it to

another robbing people, stealing livestock, kidnapping folk to ransom or sell into slavery, and killing anyone who gets in the way."

"Why didn't you ask the village for help?" Naruto asked. "We're just a day's travel away. I'm sure the old man would have been happy to help!"

"We did ask." Daisuke told Naruto. "Many times. We were told eliminating bandits was a B rank mission that would cost at least five hundred thousand. That was more than the villages could afford. Gideon always made a point to steer clear of the towns and cities that could have paid to have ninja sent out. Instead he only ever attacked folk to weak and too poor to do anything about it."

"You flatter me sheriff." The prisoner said with a laugh.

Daisuke sent him a look of pure loathing. Then turned back with a hard look for Kakashi. "If Konoha had ever cared to it could have dealt with him a long time ago, but even though we are only a day away our problems were never important enough. At least not until now."

"I am very sorry to hear that." Kakashi said. "But being a ninja is a profession like any other; it's just that we specialize in the arts of deception and violence. There are requests for our services from all over the Elemental Lands and we don't have the manpower to accept every single one."

"So you just take the jobs that pay the best, eh?"

Kakashi spread his hands. "It is a business after all. We do try and maintain certain standards and ethics, and there are things we will *not* do for any amount of money. But, when you get to the heart of the matter the village exists to profit from the skills of her ninja, it always has."

Naruto found his sensei's words a little stark. The more he learned about being a shinobi the less and less heroic it seemed.

While Kakashi and the sheriff were talking Rika's attention was focused on the bounty posters.

"You admiring all the handsome faces little girl?"

"My name is Rika, not little girl." She told the prisoner in annoyance. "And there's nothing for me to admire. I was just thinking about what it would be like to collect on some of these."

Gideon chuckled and sat up on his cot. "Well little darling, if you're wanting the chance to collect on some of those you're in luck. Almost all of those are my boys and I think I can guarantee that you'll get to meet them on the road."

That grabbed Kakashi's full attention. There were at least fifty bounty posters up on the wall. "Just how large is your band?"

Gideon smiled. "Oh about two hundred give or take."

Kakashi turned a sharp eye to the sheriff. "We were told he led twenty."

Daisuke shrugged and spread his hands. "Must have been an honest mistake. I am sure I informed the village that it was two hundred not twenty. Even so Konoha did accept and I know how bad it would look to break a contract within Fire country."

Kakashi appeared anything but happy. If he broke the contract it would look bad to all the other Fire country clients. And saying they were scared off by common bandits would make Leaf look weak.

"So wait," Naruto said. "Does this mean we might end up being attacked by two hundred men while we're on the road?"

"It's certainly starting to look that way." Kakashi said sounding grim.

Naruto waited for a minute then stuck his fist in the air. "Yeah!"

Sasuke slapped him in the back of the head.

Author's Notes: I know that Sheriff is a western title, not a Japanese one, but I was unable to find a corresponding Japanese title so have decided to use it. Likewise I know 'Gideon' is not a Japanese name. As I was writing this though I drew on westerns like The Magnificent Seven and 3:10 to Yuma for inspiration. So if this has a slight 'Western' feel to it it's more or less deliberate. Please don't let my use of western terminology and names ruin your enjoyment of the story.

A man of his word

After being given a good meal Sasuke, Naruto, and Rika had been given a room at the local Inn. Their sensei had advised them to get a good night's sleep as tomorrow was likely to be a very difficult day. Despite the suggestion none of them felt much like sleeping and were instead playing cards.

"You really think we're going to have to fight off that guy's gang tomorrow?" Naruto asked as he drew two cards.

"Sensei seems to think so," Rika answered as she took one. "So does the sheriff."

"I really hope we do." Naruto said enthusiastically. "It'll be a chance for me to show off my amazing skills."

Sasuke sighed. "You do realize that we're going to be outnumbered fifty to one? I'd hope that even your math skills were at least good enough to figure that out."

"Shut up bastard." Naruto growled.

"They say any competent Genin should be a match for at least ten armed men." Rika said. "A Chunin should be able to handle thirty and a Jonin a hundred. So strictly speaking we would be at a disadvantage unless our sensei was an elite Jonin who could handle two hundred all by himself."

Naruto snorted a laugh. "Too bad Kakashi is the worst."

"I can understand where you get that impression." Rika said. "But his reputation is nothing like that. His nickname is the 'copy ninja' and the other ninja in the village talk about him with awe. He's even in the Bingo Book."

"What's a Bingo Book?" Naruto asked.

Rika looked at him with exasperation. "Okay did you not learn anything while you were in class?"

Naruto appeared to be highly offended while Sasuke gave a slight chuckle. "The Bingo Book lists all of the most dangerous ninja from all the ninja villages." Sasuke explained.

Rika nodded. "If you're in there it automatically mean you are recognized as one of the best."

"And Kakashi is in there?" Naruto sounded as though he could not believe it.

"He is," Rika confirmed. "That's why I was so excited to join your team and have him as my sensei. Of course this was when I only knew him by reputation."

"If Kakashi is in it this book has to be completely worthless." Naruto put his cards down. "Straight flush, that's good right?"

"What the hell?" Rika said. "You got a straight flush drawing two cards?"

"Yeah."

"The next time I buy lottery tickets you're coming with me."

Naruto grinned, getting praised always felt good. "What do you think sensei is doing right now?"

"Sitting in a dark room reading porn." Sasuke said.

All three of them laughed and agreed that was all too likely.

Gorou smothered a yawn as he just sat there in the middle of some bushes just keeping an eye on the village gate. He and a couple other guys had been sent here to scout. When he'd spotted the squad of ninja arriving he'd had one of the others hurry back to

deliver the message. Most of the ninja had been *kids* ! They would definitely get the boss back.

He was thinking about how boring the job was when a strong hand slapped over his mouth. Before he even knew what was happening he felt the sharp steel kissing his throat.

In one of the wooden towers Kakashi materialized in a swirl of wind and leaves. The sheriff was waiting there for him.

"Damn but you ninja are scary," Daisuke said. "Appearing out of thin air like that; is it any wonder you make people nervous?"

"It's those sorts of skills that make us valuable in the first place Sheriff."

Daisuke gave a sour grunt in reply. "So how did it go?"

"There were two men out there. They won't be reporting anything back though."

"I'm sure Gideon's gang already knows you're here."

"It's a safe bet." Kakashi agreed. "But it's always a good idea to get rid of the enemy's eyes if you can."

Daisuke nodded. "Just so you know Kakashi-san, I and every person in this village are grateful to you and your team."

"That's nice to hear. It doesn't change the fact you deliberately misinformed my village about the circumstances when you requested this mission."

"Like I said, it was an honest mistake. And by the way Kakashi-san, we sent dozens of requests for help over the years. In those the numbers were accurate. If you had bothered to double check your own files you could have found out the truth."

"The village receives dozens of requests every week; we can't thoroughly investigate every single one. Your request for a prisoner escort looked legitimate."

"It is legitimate." The sheriff insisted. "All we want is for you to deliver the prisoner to Nagoya."

"And if we just happen to wipe out this band of thieves and murderers who have been troubling you so much the better."

"Tell me, what do you think of the village's defenses? They were built a couple of years ago in an effort to keep Gideon and his men from rolling through town and doing whatever they pleased. It worked, sort of; they don't bother us here inside the village itself. The people in the countryside suffer worse because of it though." The sheriff gave him a hard look. "All we want is to protect ourselves, that's all!"

Kakashi sighed. It wasn't as if he didn't feel sympathy for them. "I can understand that and sympathize, but we are not Fire country's police force. If we did not charge for our services the ninja villages couldn't exist. When I report this to the Hokage you can expect there to be consequences."

"What sort of consequences?" Daisuke asked nervously.

"You and the village will be black listed. We will not accept any future requests from you."

He sighed in relief. "That's fine. It's not like we'll ever need your help again after tomorrow."

Kakashi felt annoyance. He didn't blame the sheriff or his people for resorting to slightly underhanded methods to solve their problem. When you were weak you did what you had to, to survive. "I am going to bed, good night sheriff."

"Good night to you Kakashi-san."

Before dawn Kakashi had his team awake and fed. He explained the situation and what he had in mind.

"The fact is that if it were just me there wouldn't be any real danger. My concern is for you three. If it comes to an all-out fight I can't protect you all."

"Who says you have to protect us?" Naruto demanded. "We're bad ass ninja and we can take care of ourselves!"

"Isn't this what we go through all the training for?" Sasuke asked quietly. "Aren't we supposed to be able to handle ourselves?"

Rika nodded. "Every mission has the potential for danger. There wouldn't be much point to ninja if we only took the jobs that were safe."

"That is true," Kakashi admitted. "Even though they passed on false information I have decided to accept the mission even so. Part of this is for the reputation of the village, but I also feel that we should help these people. They are Fire country citizens and deserve to be able to live their lives in peace."

Naruto smiled. "Now that's more like it. It sounds like we're going to be heroes."

"Ninja aren't heroes Naruto." Sasuke told him firmly. "Haven't you figured that out yet?"

"Well at least they can be right?" Naruto insisted.

"That's very true Naruto," Kakashi said quietly averting an argument between the two. "We do things that make us heroes in some people's eyes."

Naruto grinned triumphantly.

"But never forget, that just as often we are the ones people hate. We are experts in the arts of violence. We kill people, kidnap people,

steal, and spy; all these acts are considered crimes under normal circumstances. You shouldn't fool yourself into believing you can do these things without making some people hate you."

Naruto's smile slipped. "But... more people like you than hate you right?"

Beneath his mask Kakashi smiled. "It's possible I suppose."

"You know sensei the way you answer things always makes me unhappy." Naruto grumped.

"Good, consider it training. Ninja regularly hear things that leave them unhappy."

When Kakashi and his team came to collect their prisoner he was just finishing his breakfast.

"I thank you kindly for the meal sheriff. I hope I get to show you my own hospitality one of these days."

"If you do it will be down in Hell." Daisuke turned to Kakashi. "He is all yours now. I wish you luck delivering him."

"All right." Kakashi said.

"Little lady, boys, Kakashi-san," Gideon tipped a wide brimmed white hat. As he did so he clinked. There were iron manacles on both wrists with chains connecting them together. "This here is my lucky hat, I never go anywhere without it."

"You're welcome to wear it," Kakashi said. "Though I doubt you have much luck left."

"Don't know about that. I've always been what you might call lucky."

"I doubt many people would consider your situation to be all that lucky."

"Could be worse," Gideon said with an insufferable smirk. "For instance, the bounty on me is only good if I'm delivered alive."

"I was wondering about that." Rika said. From inside her jacket she produced a sheaf of fifty seven wanted posters with his being right on top. "Yours is the only one listed as 'payable alive only.' All the rest are payable dead or alive. Why is that?"

"Did you notice who is offering the bounty?" Gideon asked.

"All of them are being offered by the provincial governor. That's not unusual for petty criminals."

"Petty?" Gideon offered her a hurt expression. "Now while me and my boys may not seem like much to ninja from the Leaf we've done as we pleased around these parts."

"I know," Rika said frostily. "Your crimes are listed on your wanted poster; theft, extortion, arson, abduction, and murder."

"That sound petty to you little lady?"

"Fine," Rika said. "You're a *tremendous* criminal."

Grinning he tipped his hat to her.

It was early morning as they moved Gideon from the jail to the gate. There were however a good many people standing outside watching. Clearly they had known what was coming and had wanted a last look at the criminal who had caused all of them so much trouble over the years.

The people hissed at him. Some made chopping motions in front of their necks. More than a few spat in his direction; all the while Gideon held his head up high as though relishing all of the animosity.

"Why are you so happy?" Naruto asked. "Don't you get they all hate you?"

"Oh I'm right sure they all hate me, but they all know who I am. More important they're all scared of me, every last one. If you all weren't here not a one of them would have the nerve to so much as look me in the eye. That's the ultimate form of respect you know."

"That's not respect." Naruto told him. "Someday I'm going to be Hokage and every person in Konoha will acknowledge me. They'll cheer for me and love me, that's way better than being feared."

"That so?" Gideon said. "You're real young yet kid and don't understand how things work. You can't lead lots of people without being feared."

"That's not so." Naruto said flatly. "Nobody's afraid of the old man, but they still do whatever he says."

Rika stared at Naruto amazed. She could still remember what it had felt like to have the Hokage's attention on her for even a moment.

"You're Hokage is Sarutobi right?"

"That's right, old man Sarutobi." Naruto grinned. "He wouldn't hurt a fly."

Chuckling Gideon turned to Kakashi. "I guess they don't teach the kids about the Third War do they? Things like Kazka just sort of get forgotten, huh?"

"War is an ugly thing." Kakashi answered.

"Oh you'll get no argument from me."

Naruto frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you want to tell him or should I Kakashi-san?"

Naruto looked at his sensei questioningly.

"There is nothing to tell Naruto." Kakashi answered. "It was a battle that was fought back before you were ever born."

Gideon turned to Naruto and gave his own answer. "Kazka was a town in Rain country with about twenty thousand people. The Rock nins had occupied it and were using it as a forward supply base. Your harmless old man sent an army of Leaf ninja to 'pacify' it."

"What's that mean?" Naruto asked.

"The Leaf ninja surrounded the village to make sure no one could leave, and then they burned it down."

"That's a lie!" Naruto snapped angrily. "The old man would never do anything like that! Right sensei?" He looked to Kakashi expecting him to confirm that it was a lie.

Instead he spoke in a neutral tone. "Terrible things happen in war time Naruto. The Hokage was forced to make some hard choices."

Naruto looked as if he had just been speared through the gut.

"Still think your old man aint feared boy? He may be civilized and have a kindly face now that he's old, but don't think he can't do worse things than I ever have. He's feared all right. That's how it works. You put on a civilized face and try to be liked if you can, that does make things a mite easier, but you always got to be feared. It's always better to be feared than loved. Fear lasts longer. Like I said, it's the ultimate form of respect."

Kakashi took a hold of his arm and hurried the pace a bit. "Thank you for the life lesson, now let's get you to your trial and your execution."

Gideon picked up his stride in response as they neared the gate. "I aint ever gonna stand trial Kakashi-san."

"I beg to differ."

Gideon politely grinned. "I am a man of my word Kakashi-san, and I give you my word. I aint ever gonna stand trial."

"We'll see." Kakashi said politely.